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INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 4511

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003821

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL AF
SUBJECT: UNAMA: BLEAK PROSPECTS FOR 2010 ELECTIONS

REF: KABUL 3678

Classified By: CDDEA Ambassador E. Anthony Wayne; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Setting the scene for the ambassadors gathered at the weekly meeting at UNAMA on November 30, SRSG Kai Eide said that if Afghanistan's Parliamentary and District Council elections were to be held as scheduled on May 22, 2010, they must be announced by December 27. Therefore, the international community must take its stance quickly, as a confrontation with Karzai on the issue could be imminent, Eide warned. With just weeks left to make a decision, Eide introduced a UNAMA paper highlighting the significant remaining issues that need to be addressed before these elections can take place. The need for a census and greater clarity on district affiliation were also cited as stumbling blocks to a 2010 election.

¶2. (C) Many ambassadors in attendance shared Eide's concerns, advocating for postponing the elections until necessary reforms are completed. However, a few ambassadors dissented, opining that postponing the elections would not be credible in the eyes of the Afghan people. Ambassador Wayne made clear that the United States and others would likely not be willing to fund the 2010 elections, as they had done substantially in 2009, if not preceded by significant reforms and other steps to assure a credible election process. Eide said he had no intentions of taking concerns public, but rather of talking quietly with President Karzai and others. In a subsequent private conversation, Eide and Ambassador Eikenberry agreed that the preferable way ahead would be to use private conversations to bring Afghans to the point where they agree that the best way forward would be to postpone elections until needed reforms and other required preparatory steps have been taken. End Summary.

IEC Inadequate

¶3. (C) Stating that the prospect of a May 2010 election "doesn't look good" and that "there's no way" that UNDP-Elect could team up with the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) as it currently exists, Eide offered his assessment that the issues that need to be resolved before the next elections are nearly insurmountable in the small window of time remaining. Even if the election were postponed until September 2010, which Eide called permissible according to a (contested) IEC statement from last year, he was not confident that adequate reforms within the IEC could be made in time. "It's very hard to see how to proceed with elections given the current structure of the IEC," Eide stated.

¶4. (C) Given what transpired in the 2009 election, Eide advocated for a stronger UNAMA role within the IEC, while acknowledging that President Karzai opposes this increased involvement. The international community, Eide said, will

have to tread carefully in order to achieve the reform they seek at the IEC without sparking a controversy with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). He also noted that an IEC reform law is under consideration in Parliament, and that the international community should discuss their priorities for the law in depth with the IEC before it moves forward. He additionally pointed to the need for a realistic vote registering, the need to vet candidates and the many challenges of holding district elections.

Who Will Pay for It?

¶5. (C) Bluntly pointing out that the election cannot take place if no one will pay for it, British Deputy Ambassador Dodd noted that no country had offered funding for the 2010 election at this point. Thanking Eide for his paper and for framing the debate on the elections, Ambassador Wayne said that the United States shares all of Eide's doubts. He argued that the U.S. -- and other donors -- are not likely to be willing to pay if it is not a credible process, adding that it will be impossible to sell the idea to our own democratic audiences that we will pay for another flawed election. He also noted the great unlikelihood that significant reform of existing laws could take place in time to allow for elections in September. Eide also questioned how funding could be solicited under the circumstances. "I don't see the international community giving money for elections given the current status of the IEC," Eide said.

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What do the Afghans Think?

¶6. (C) Before deciding to postpone the election, the Aga Khan Foundation representative suggested that Afghans be polled to determine what they think about the need for electoral reform. The international community should take into consideration whether Afghans believe that the elections can proceed as planned, or if they deem reforms necessary, he said. While agreeing that Afghan input was valuable, Eide emphasized that he does not want this to become another dispute between Karzai and Abdullah, who he believes would oppose the postponement of the elections, but also demand significant reform.

¶7. (C) Agreeing that it is important to understand what the Afghans think, Ambassador Wayne observed that it could be damaging to bring the issue to the Afghan public at this time. Eide also advocated against raising the postponement publicly at this point, but suggested that electoral reform could be raised in London. He said he believed the way to proceed was to have quiet dialogue with Karzai and others. Both the Turkish and Norwegian envoys highlighted the possible negative consequences of postponing the elections, with the Turkish ambassador advocating that the election must take place in 2010 to "satisfy" the Afghan people.

How to Win Support for Postponement?

¶8. (C) Recognizing that President Karzai tends to balk at suggestions that the elections should be postponed to allow for certain technical reforms, Eide posited that reintegration is a potential hook the international community could use to draw Karzai's support for postponing the elections. The elections could be used as a tool for reintegration, he said, but only if they are held later and the reintegration strategy has time to come together. Dodd suggested forming an Afghan-led reform commission that would allow the Afghans to frame the answers on how to improve their own electoral system as a way of enhancing Afghan

buy-in for the reform agenda. Eide closed by saying he would like to write further thoughts on his paper (which post will provide to the Department) and would try to organize a second discussion as early as Thursday, December 3.

¶9. (C) Ambassador Eikenberry met privately with Kai Eide on the evening of November 30. They agreed that the ideal would be to postpone all elections for at least one year and in the interim the IEC and electoral law would be reformed, candidate vetting could be improved, good voter registration lists established, and possibly a census conducted, depending on security conditions. (Note: The last census was conducted in 1979 and it was only partial due to the eruption of violence. A census was scheduled for 2008, but it was canceled due to security concerns.) Perhaps the Afghans could also agree to re-look the plethora of elections currently scheduled for the years ahead, which are neither affordable nor sustainable. They also agreed that it would be best not to have to force the Afghans to this perspective, but rather try to serve as a catalyst via private discussions to get the Afghans to reach sound conclusions about the need for reform, reflection and postponement. This will require a good deal of shaping with Karzai and others over the next several months. They also reached preliminary agreement that the next best option would be to hold parliamentary elections and postpone district elections and that the worst option would be to try to hold both elections in 2010.

¶10. (C) Comment: Embassy sees great risk of proceeding with elections as scheduled, especially without needed reforms and adequate preparations to make the results credible. We could face cycles of Afghan political wrangling; managing very imperfect electoral processes; diverting security forces from other priority tasks; and, distracting donor attention from efforts to build stronger institutions and develop economic prosperity. End Comment.

Eikenberry